

I'm going home

I follow the filtered silence and gales
through a car window
I watch this infinite ribbon of elegant burgundy eyelashes
stretch above the snow;
these throngs of red willow whips
are frozen in dance around the feet of maples, cedars and birches
dreaming of snow-padded silver skies
while they sleep softly under Arctic rage.

The featureless covering on both heaven and earth
even puts me to sleep. At every stop we get,
whether it is my Auntie's, Mindohwabee's or Tim Horton's,
we grab a coffee—not a *cup* of coffee—a coffee, double double.
It is the lifeblood of everyone who tries to live here.
The dark syrup pounds in our veins, pours out of us,
and paves the one and only road
home.

And I remember:
I'm going *home*

to hide in the soft, brown insides of my mother's tiny trailer,
emerging to visit at my grandmother's house,
a labor of my grandfather's love on the corner of a morning walk and a maple street.

Not two minutes in the door,
my uncle picks a fight with my aunt.
Then, realizing his social faux-pas,
he lightens his load on a chuckle.
The furniture in this house has been rearranged
as often as the inhabitants have changed shifts—
including the dog(s) kept outside.
But the two sweetgrass and birchbark placemats
on the wall haven't moved in years.

That's all it is:

playing cribbage in my Aunt's house on Christmas Day,
pegs slip off of the table
onto cracked linoleum
between drops of spilled beer,
they point to the packed living room beneath half-sized stompings and video games,
my ears strain to pull words from the conversation
in a tongue as old as we are
and I get chastised for spacing out;

playing volleyball on warm, summer nights

in front of the house built of the trees and hands of my great-grandfather,
 a family so big, we fill up a whole ball court with spectators to spare:
 cousins pitted against cousins
 nieces against uncles
 and the ball is our wit
 that survived a language genocide
 back when black robes replaced armor,
 and pedophilic assaults replaced gunfire
 (like those against my Uncle Naangoonskwat in the hollow of night);
 back when notes were sent home
 from my mother's grade one teacher to my grandparents:
 "I'm afraid to inform you, Mr. and Mrs. B'noswe,
 that your speaking the Native language
 in your household is negatively affecting your daughter,
 and her ability to learn English in her classes..."

after decades
 they slip out:
 "Can you get me that *biish*,¹ *odi*²? Am I ever thirsty."

It's those *words*

to hear
 those words—

it's cribbage and volleyball, too—

but, it's leaving the world at the sign,
 covered in snow up to its knees,
 painted by a local artist,
 that says:
 Welcome to the Village of Wikwemikong

ENDNOTES

1. Water
2. Over there

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